

# Shakespearean Georgic

## An Ecological Reading of *As You Like It*

**Mustapha Fahmi. Ph. D**

Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

In a typical new historicist move, the American critic, Louis Adrian Montrose, reduces *As You Like It* to a Shakespearean contribution to the political debate over primogeniture. The play, he argues in a highly influential essay, recognises and resolves social conflicts, especially the rivalry between elder and younger brothers. Montrose's focus on the first scenes at the expense of the rest of the play is, as he himself admits, a reaction to those who ignore the primogeniture issue in favour of the pastoral world of the play (Montrose 1995:40). What cannot be denied, nonetheless, is that the massive change that some of the characters undergo takes place in the forest. What kind of influence, then, does the forest of Arden have over those who visit it? The answer that most ecologically oriented studies and productions of the play seem to give (Kenneth Branagh's 2006 film production is a good example here) is the "magic" of the pastoral. But is the world of Arden a pastoral one in the first place? Shakespeare's genres are seldom pure. His tragedies abound in comic and grotesque elements, and some of his comedies tread the brink of tears. His pastoral, at least in this play, is no exception to the rule. My contention is that the world of Arden is less pastoral than georgic; and it is, I believe, the georgic aspect of Arden that converts the characters of the play from tourists idealising the life of the forest to "dwellers" open to its being. I also argue that Shakespeare's interest in the question of primogeniture is part of his interest in the larger issue of tradition as a gift of the past. The way in which all gifts must be returned one way or another, including the gifts of nature, is part of my argument. I draw on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, most notably the concept of "dwelling," which he introduces in his later writings as an attempt to counter the anthropocentrism of the post-enlightenment thought. It is important to note here that I do not seek to analyse a specific production of the play; rather, I want to suggest that the appropriation of Shakespeare's comedy by ecocritics as well as by ecologically conscious producers and directors is based on a misunderstanding of Shakespeare's vision of the natural world.

### Heideggerian Ecology

One of the highlights of Heidegger's anti-humanist philosophy is that there is no future for human beings unless we acknowledge our limits and understand that we are the gift of something beyond ourselves, something non-human, and that the natural elements make a

claim on us and ask us to let them reveal themselves and be disclosed in their own unique and inimitable way. But how is this possible? Through language, says the German philosopher, and particularly poetic language. Poetry makes things come alive, because it is one of the few contexts in which things are given the opportunity to shine forth and unfold in a way particular to their own essence. A dictionary may give us a good and complete definition of the word “rose,” for example, but only poetry is capable of un-concealing the “roseness” of the rose, that is to say, its essential way of being in the world.

Heidegger’s later work is notable as well for its critique of modern technology and its tendency to “en-frame” both nature and human beings. To en-frame something, in Heidegger’s understanding, is to make it part of a system and reduce it to a mere resource for further exploitation. A forest, for example, is en-framed when it is treated less as a forest existing for itself than as a “standing reserve” for timber production. To treat things in this way is to deny them the right to exist as things having a certain meaning of their own and force them into meanings that serve our own instrumentalist needs. Heidegger’s response to the threat of en-framing, which he regards as one of the most dangerous consequences of the massive presence of technology in our life, is “dwelling.”

Unlike technology, which creates a world in which only resources are acknowledged, dwelling is an attempt to create a space in which human beings can regain a sense of their humanity and reveal themselves in a way proper to their essence as beings that are part of the physical environment, not apart from it (Heidegger 1977:39-40). If we are to escape the instrumentalist understanding of the world that prevails in modern society, we need to see ourselves as we are, that is, as the gift of nature, and to acknowledge the demands that our natural environment puts on us. To dwell here is not to occupy a particular space on the earth, but rather to stand in a site open to its being in a relationship of duty and responsibility. To dwell is not to live in a certain place, but to allow that place to live in you, as it were. Among the poetic expressions that emphasise the importance of dwelling as the proper way of being in the world, georgic is probably the most interesting of all.

### **Georgic Vs. Pastoral**

Georgic is usually defined as a literary work about rural life and husbandry. In his preface to Dryden’s translation of Virgil’s *Georgics*, Addison defines the genre as “part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry” (Addison 1970: 120). Addison’s definition emphasises the didactic aspect of georgic, especially when he limits its purpose to giving “plain and direct instructions,” alluding, most certainly, to the passages in which Virgil foregrounds the practical aspect of agricultural life, providing the reader with ample advice on how to plough, to choose crop, and to maintain land. But georgic is certainly more than that; and one important aspect of it is that it tends, like pastoral, to extol rural life and nature. However, while pastoral seems to idealise nature and celebrate the idle and contemplative life of the shepherd, georgic takes a more realistic attitude towards nature and celebrates the hard work of the farmer and his attunement to the natural order with its highs and lows. Pastoral is essentially a city genre. It is written by, or for, city people; and its fall from grace after the English Puritan revolution in favour of georgic, among other genres, is hardly without significance.

In early modern England, court was the centre of all literary activity. Money, recognition and everything else the writers of the period needed came from the court. This accounts probably for the fact that the most representative genres under Queen Elizabeth and

King James were courtly. The sonnet, the tragedy, the comedy, the chronicle, and the pastoral were either focused on court life or produced by writers eager to please the people of the court to secure their patronage. Pleasing the courtiers implied either depicting to them the sort of life they knew and were capable of relating to, or representing to them things the way they liked to see them. Pastoral was one of the literary forms in which nature was approached less according to its reality than according to the idealistic and nostalgic view the aristocrats of the period had of country life.

One of the consequences of the English Revolution was the decentralisation of power. The twenty years of the Puritan rule stripped the court not only of its political power, but also of the financial and intellectual influence it had always exerted on the literary world. Poets and dramatists felt no longer obliged to please the court or satisfy the tastes of its people. As a result, certain genres, like pastoral, lost their popularity, while others, like georgic, flourished. An example of this shift from pastoral to georgic can be clearly seen in the poetry of Andrew Marvell, most evidently in his "Mower poems".

But, unlike Marvell, Shakespeare scarcely needed a revolution to adopt a georgic attitude towards nature. His famous realism, enables him not only to describe country life in all its complexity, but also to turn an ironic glare on the artificiality of Renaissance pastoral romance in some of his plays, most notably in *As You Like It*.

### **I Dwell Therefore I Am**

The first mention of the forest of Arden in the play, by Charles, the wrestler, associates it to the classical myth of the golden age (*As You Like It*, 1.1.119), an association that evokes a deep longing for a mythological age of innocence and purity. The myth has its parallel in the biblical Garden of Eden, a lost world of eternal beauty and childlike innocence, which constitutes the heart of the Western pastoral tradition (Bate 2000:26). However, the biblical Garden of Eden has a realistic resonance that links it more to the georgic tradition than to the pastoral one. "And the Lord God," reads the book of Genesis, "took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." In other words, Adam was given the Garden not only to enjoy its fruits and admire its beauty, but also to protect it and maintain it.

Charles' vision of Arden, like that of most city people, will be quickly contradicted by the reality of Arden; for one of the first things we learn about the magic forest is that it is not without "winter and rough weather" (2.5.8). Its inhabitants are "true labourer[s]" (3.2.71) whose hands are "often tarred with the surgery of the sheep" (3.2.60-61) and hard with the handling of ewes whose "fells" are "greasy" (3.2.51-52). There is also hunger in Arden. Adam barely survives, and people must kill animals most cruelly to escape starvation (2.1.22-43). There are snakes too in Arden as well as hungry lions, and the Duke's famous description of the forest is closer to Lear's storm than to Sydney's *Arcadia*.

We do not see Duke Senior and his followers when they first arrive at the forest of Arden, to be able to better assess the change they go through, but we do have the chance to see his daughter, Rosalind, and her friends. An ecocritical reading of the play should probably focus on the difference between the two parties: Rosalind and her companions, who come to reside in the forest, and Duke Senior and his co-mates and brothers in exile, who have already become dwellers.

Like Charles, Rosalind and her friends have a pastoral view of nature; they come to it as tourists, and, like most tourists, they see in it only what they want to see: a shepherd in love (2.4.42-43). In this sense, Pastoral is a kind of "en-framing," it reduces nature to a resource for

human enjoyment and admiration. By taking a georgic attitude towards nature, Shakespeare seems to want to liberate country life from the artificiality of the pastoral convention, the way Rosalind herself manages to free the lovers of Arden from the illusions of the Petrarchan love. To describe nature in Arcadian terms as an innocent world where the sun always shines, and the shepherds pass their time piping, composing eclogues, and wooing their mistresses is to prevent nature from revealing itself in its own inimitable way and force it into meanings alien to its essence. Duke Senior and his friends, especially Jaques, are dwellers not only because they move beyond the pastoral myth into the realism of georgic, but also because they go beyond the anthropocentric idea of nature as something that exists mainly to satisfy man's needs and serve his purposes. For them, the cold and the wind are not natural disasters, they are ways in which nature shines forth and discloses its secrets as nature, they are "counsellors"; and the animals are companions with rights of their own:

DUKE SEN.       Come, shall we go and kill us venison?  
                   And yet it irks me the poor dappled fools,  
                   Being native burghers of this desert city,  
                   Should in their own confines with forked heads  
                   Have their round haunches gor'd.

FIRST LORD                               Indeed my lord,  
                   The melancholy Jaques grieves at that,  
                   And in that kind swears you do more usurp  
                   Than doth your brother that hath banish'd you.  
                   To-day my Lord of Amiens and myself  
                   Did steal behind him as he lay along  
                   Under an oak, whose antique root peeps out  
                   Upon the brook that brawls along this wood,  
                   To the which place a poor sequester'd stag,  
                   That from the hunter's aim had ta'en ahurt,  
                   Did come to languish; and indeed my lord,  
                   The wretched animal heav'd forth such groans  
                   That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat  
                   Almost to bursting, and the big round tears  
                   Cours'd one another down his innocent nose  
                   In piteous chase; and thus the hairy fool,  
                   Much marked of the melancholy Jaques,  
                   Stood on the th'extremest verge of the swift brook,  
                   Augmenting it with tears.

DUKE SEN.                               But what said Jaques?  
                   Did he not moralise this spectacle?

FIRST LORD.       O yes, into a thousand similes.  
                   First, for his weeping into the needless stream,  
                   'Poor deer', quoth he, 'thou mak'st a testament  
                   As worldlings do, giving thy sum of more  
                   To that which had too much.' Then being there alone,  
                   Left and abandon'd of his velvet friend,  
                   'Tis right', quoth he, 'thus misery doth part  
                   The flux of company.' Anon a careless herd,  
                   Full of the pasture, jumps along by him

And never stays to greet him. 'Ay', quoth Jaques,  
 'Sweep on you fat and greasy citizens,  
 'Tis just the fashion. Wherefore do you look  
 Upon that poor and broken bankrupt there?'  
 Thus most invectively he pierceth through  
 The body of country, city, court,  
 Yea, and of this our life, swearing that we  
 Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what's worse,  
 To fright the animals and to kill them up  
 In their assign'd and native dwelling-place.

(2.1.21-63)

The passage is a good illustration of Heidegger's idea that poetry is a means by which things achieve their presence and move from concealment to unconcealment (Heidegger 1977:34-35). The oak, the brook, the deer, and Jaques all come alive, less as separate entities than as connected parts of the same whole. The deer's weeping reflects Jaques' own sadness and melancholy, and the tears flowing from their eyes join the "brawling" of the brook in simple oneness. Jaques' complete attunement to the natural order will be emphasised at the end of the play by his decision to stay in the forest, not before undergoing, like the other characters, an important change, a change that involves accepting the conditions of life and acknowledging the human factor (5.4.185-192). Jaques is Shakespeare's foremost ecological man (in Branagh's film he is a vegetarian), the only character, perhaps, in the whole cannon who is capable of disliking someone for "marring" "trees" by "writing love songs in their barks" (3.2.255-256); and despite his melancholy, he deserves a place in ecocriticism as important, I think, as the place that Caliban enjoys among postcolonial critics. Surprisingly, the critics' attitude towards Jaques hardly reflects what Shakespeare seems to think of his melancholic character; and a quick comparison of *As You Like It* with its main source, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, is likely in my view to give us an insight into the play's thematic focus.

Shakespeare likes to play with his sources. One of his favourite moves, as many scholars have observed, has to do with the question of motive. When Shakespeare takes a story from someone else, and a story is always a story of someone doing something, he often starts by ignoring the motive behind the action. In *Rosalynde*, for example, Aliena falls in love with Oliver because he heroically rescues her and her cousin from the attack of certain villains. In Shakespeare's rendering of the story, she and Oliver fall in love at first sight, and for no apparent reason. The difference between the two versions is quite significant. In the source, love is linked to a particular incident; it needs a reason to exist. In Shakespeare, love stems from the general effect that the forest has on those who open themselves to it, an effect so extraordinary that it makes people shed their former interested selves and replace them with new ones: "'Twas I. But 'tis not I," says Oliver when asked about his past dealings with his younger brother. The other aspect of Shakespeare's treatment of his sources is that he usually adds a perspective opposite to the one that is already present in the source. This not only makes the play more balanced, it also allows one perspective to expose both the flaws and the strengths of the other perspective. Jaques does not exist in Lodge's novella. Shakespeare seems to have created him in order to counter the pastoral perspective he has inherited from his source and to criticise the attitude of the people of the city and their indifference to the claims that nature makes on them as human beings. Jaques thinks, for example, that the Duke and his followers are both usurpers and hypocrites; for not only do they disrupt the harmony of the forest, they also chase the animals, the legitimate inhabitants, out of their "dwelling-

place.” The Duke is to blame more than any other person, according to Jaques, because he knows too well the pain of being driven out of his home by a usurper.

### **Reciprocity**

Though hardly the centre of the play’s preoccupation, the primogeniture issue is important, and Montrose is quite right in calling our attention to it; however, Shakespeare’s interest in this issue is, as I have already pointed out, part of his interest in the larger problem of tradition as a gift of the past, a gift that has to be reciprocated sooner or later, a major concern in such plays as *Hamlet* and *Richard II*, for instance.

Oliver’s fortune and social status are gifts of the past that he owes less to his hard work than to his being the elder son of Sir Rowland. The “courtesy of nations” allows him to be not only in charge of his father’s land and revenue, but also of his younger brother. The principle of reciprocity requires that gifts be returned (Lawrence 1986); yet there is only one way in which the gifts of the past can be returned, and that is by being bestowed on successor generations. But if giving increases the authority of the giver and allows him to gain control over the recipient (Cheal 1988:21), Oliver’s refusal to give his brother what belongs to him decreases his authority and results in Orlando’s rebellion. I do not think that Oliver is questioning the principle of primogeniture, as Montrose would have us believe, he is rather questioning his brother’s right to stop the process and break the tradition upon which depends his own position both in society as a gentleman, and in the family as Orlando’s “better” (1.1.45-49).

But to be able to reciprocate or retaliate, one has first to remember what one owes to others, which gives memory a prominent role in the co-ordination of actions among people as well as in the articulation of self-awareness (Bristol 1996:142). The false sense of security and self-sufficiency that the life of the city gives people like Oliver, Duke Frederick, or even Duke senior, makes them sometimes forget what they owe to others and to nature. The power of Arden, I propose, lies precisely in its capacity to bring its visitors to remember something they have forgotten:

Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
The seasons’ difference, as the icy fang  
And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,  
Which when it bites and blows upon my body  
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile, and say  
‘This is no flattery. These are counsellors  
That feelingly persuade me what I am.’  
Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.  
(2.1.5-17)

The self-awareness that the Duke expresses here with great eloquence is the consequence of a genuine dwelling in nature, a georgic nature, removed from the illusions of the pastoral ideal.

The natural elements in his description are approached as things that have a life of their own and a meaning that they yield only to those who abandon themselves to the natural order. The “uses of adversity” are “sweet,” because they remind human beings of their limits and of the fact that what they really are depends not so much on their wealth or power as on what they owe to each other and to nature, hence the necessity for them to care for each other as well as for the environment, and to return the gifts they receive, including the gifts of nature. But how can one reciprocate the gifts of nature? By protecting nature and preserving it for the future. “Mortals dwell in that they save the earth,” says Heidegger, “saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing.... Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their clemency...” (Heidegger 2001: 148). The Duke is a perfect dweller precisely because he responds to the demands that things make on him to treat them as things having a meaning of their own. To find “good in everything” is not to be “positive” in the vulgar sense, but to acknowledge that things have an intrinsic value that transcends whatever use we may make of them.

In *King Lear*, the cruelty of the storm reveals to the old monarch not only the limits of the human and his total dependence upon nature, it reminds him as well that there are “poor naked wretches” living in his kingdom, creatures he seems to have forgotten. When Duke Senior invites an old servant, Adam, to his table, we feel that he is in a sense fulfilling Lear’s hope to “shake the superflux” and “show the heavens more just” (*King Lear*, 3.4.35-36). “Only if we are capable of dwelling,” says Heidegger, “only then can we build” (Heidegger 2001:157). Build what? A humane and responsible society, perhaps, a society in which people acknowledge their debt to nature and to each other. We do not know much about Duke Senior’s competence in managing state affairs, but when we hear him call his companions “brothers and co-mates,” suggesting some sort of social equality which he could never think of in the heavy decorum of his former life as a duke; when we see him take Adam’s hand and ask Orlando to take the other hand to support the old man (2.7.202); when we hear him regret having to kill animals in order to survive; when he says that he finds “Sermons in stones, and good in everything,” we get the impression that, if this man recovers his “former honour,” he will make a better duke, and that after *dwelling* in the forest, now he can *build*.

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